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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRO FOCUSES ON PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARD NATO

REF: (A) STATE 83856 (B) PODGORICA 283 and previous

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a December 1 meeting with the Ambassador and DCM, the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs stressed their commitment to reinforcing Montenegro's ties with NATO in the coming months. The Ambassador welcomed this commitment, while cautioning that support by the U.S. or its NATO allies for inviting Montenegro into MAP next April has not yet been decided. Both ministers were realistic about the challenges ahead, but pledged to build even more rapidly on the substantial progress that Montenegro has already made in meeting the USG's NATO-related priorities (Ref A). The GOM is also focused on ensuring a successful PARP assessment in late January. Regarding MAP, they appealed for Montenegro to be judged on its own merits. On 27 November, the Montenegrin Parliament approved the GoM's National Security Strategy, which explicitly sets NATO membership as a top priority. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) The Ministers updated us on Montenegro's progress in the USG priority areas (noted below) and resolved to accelerate work in the key areas during the coming weeks.

-- Excess Weapons Destruction (ON TARGET): MoD is finalizing arrangements for use of government land to continue its destruction of excess ordnance. Earlier this year, the GOM destroyed almost 90 percent of its MANPADS and tons of other equipment. It hopes to achieve Government concurrence, perhaps this week, with the establishment of a new site to destroy hundreds of sea mines and other ordinance.

-- PfP Exercises (ON TARGET): Montenegro plans to participate in three exercises in 2009 and is discussing with its Adriatic Charter partners a proposed regional exercise. (Note: We have records for the following: Cooperative Archer / Longbow / Lancer May-June 09; Combined Endeavor - Sept 09; MEDCEUR Sept 09.)

-- Peacekeeping Deployment (ON TARGET): Two medical teams are now training in Macedonia for deployment to Afghanistan starting in early 2009. The MoD also hopes to announce in early 2009 the deployment of an infantry platoon to ISAF. (The USG has offered to provide training and equipment in the meantime.)

-- NATO-compatible procurements (ON TARGET): The MoD is on track for acquisitions totaling 8.5 million euros with 2008 funds. We also learned of plans for another 5.9 million euros worth of purchases next year. These figures represent significant proportions of Montenegro's modest defense budget.

-- Defense Budget (ON TARGET): According to a preliminary estimate from the Ministries of Defense and Finance, proposed defense expenditures in 2009 will amount to 2.11 percent of projected GDP. The Ministry noted that GDP could fall below MOF's projected growth in 2009 as a result of the global financial crisis, in which case the defense budget would account for a higher percentage.

-- IPP (ON TARGET): The MoD reported completing 32 of the 46 IPP actions planned for 2008. It plans 49 for 2009.

-- IPAP Activities (ON TARGET): The MoD has completed all of its Partnership Goals for 2008, and is now addressing the 2009 goals, including more specific planning for participation of naval and air force assets in NATO activities.

-- Information Security Agreement (AHEAD OF TARGET): Vucinic confirmed that Montenegro received NATO certification last month for its information security procedures and facilities.

-- Rule of Law (TARGET SET): FM Rocen asserted that the GOM

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would establish its first interagency investigative task force to fight corruption and organized crime within the next few months. The Embassy's RLA will support this project. The GOM will also work on codifying an effective criminal procedure code and conflict of interest laws.

-- Public Support (ON TARGET): The GoM leadership plans to step up the NATO "communications strategy" that has already been underway for several months. The GOM will increasingly rely on a broad group of senior officials to make the case for NATO (recent examples include a helpful interview with the Finance Minister and event for university students last week with the Interior Minister and UK Ambassador).

13. (SBU) COMMENT: The ministers indicated that Montenegro will pull out all the stops to bring the country closer to NATO in the coming months. They left little doubt that an invitation into MAP is a top priority. The ministers' attention to practical steps toward closer links with the Alliance showed greater understanding of NATO interests and an appreciation that they will be judged more by their actions than their words.
End Comment.

MOORE